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ABSTRACT

This study is the first of its kind to study third-person perception within the context of school violence. Linkages to the health psychology literature (optimistic bias) provide the basis for further understanding of adolescents' perceptions of school violence and the influence of media violence in their lives. Results from a survey of 1,500 middle school and high school students suggest third-person perception regarding media violence decreases with age, and is influenced by perceived reality of media violence, optimistic bias, and knowledge of real world youth violence. (Contains 26 references and 2 tables.) (Author/RS)

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Third-Person Perception and School Violence

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Third-Person Perception and School Violence

John Chapin (Penn State University) and Grace Coleman (Crisis Center North)

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Mass Communication & Society Division

Abstract

The study is the first of its kind to study third-person perception within the context of school violence. Linkages to the health psychology literature (optimistic bias) provide the basis for further understanding of adolescents' perceptions of school violence and the influence of media violence in their lives. Results from a survey of 1,500 middle school and high school students suggest third-person perception regarding media violence decreases with age, and is influenced by perceived reality of media violence, optimistic bias, and knowledge of real world youth violence.

Although school shootings have decreased over the past decade, the Columbine massacre and subsequent violent outbursts have brought the issue of school violence to the forefront of the public consciousness. Middle school and high school students now live in an era of zero tolerance policies where students are expelled for writing violent essays, and MTV bans music videos for violent content over sexual content. Parents, teachers, and politicians point to violent media as a training ground for school violence, but student perceptions differ significantly.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC, 2001) attributes ¼ of school-aged deaths to four causes: automobile accidents, accidental injuries, homicide, and suicide. A national CDC survey indicates that 37.7% of youth are treated annually for injuries, 14.2% have experienced physical violence on school premises, 17.3% carry weapons to school monthly for protection, 8.8% have been intentionally injured by a boyfriend or girlfriend, and an additional 5.2% have skipped school because they feared for their personal safety (CDC, 2001). The evident gap between the risks and the precautions taken may be explained by student perceptions.

The school violence context provides a great opportunity for studying third-person perception, in that awareness of recent school shootings is high, yet students seem to reject the notion that their violent media intake influences them. This appears to be classic third-person perception, with students believing the greatest impact of violent media is not on themselves (the first-persons), or their friends (the second persons), but on distant others (the third-persons).

The current study serves two broad purposes related to third-person perceptions. (1) The study seeks to document third-person perception among middle school and high school students. The current literature is over-reliant on college student and adult samples. This study is the first to apply the third-person perception framework within the school violence context. (2) The study also investigates the relative contributions of personal attributes (grade level, knowledge, and self-esteem), the media (perceived media reality), and optimistic bias to third-person perception.

THIRD-PERSON PERCEPTION

Third-Person Perception and Personal Attributes

The third-person perception hypothesis posits that people believe they are less influenced than others by media messages. Since the concept was introduced (Davison, 1983), over 50 published articles have confirmed third-person perception in numerous contexts, including news reports (Gunther, 1998; Price, Huang, & Tewksbury, 1997), advertisements (Chapin, 2001; Young, Faber, & Shah, 2000), public service announcements (Chapin, 2000; White & Dillon, 2000), and entertainment programming (Peiser & Peter, 2001; Salwen & Dupagne, 1999). For instance, Peiser and Peter's (2001) study of 200 German adults revealed that people tend to perceive others as more inclined

toward undesirable viewing behaviors (i.e. habitual viewing and escapism); third-person perception was strongest, if participants believed the target "others" were less well educated than themselves.

Only a few studies have directly addressed media violence, and none have done so within the context of school violence. Rojas, Shah and Faber's (1996) 133 college student participants believed they were less influenced than others by TV violence and pornography. Willingness to censor media messages was related to third-person perception. Similarly, Salwen and Dupagne's (1999) 721 adult participants believed others were more influenced toward immorality by TV violence (and the media's general influence). Greater degrees of third-person perception predicted participants' willingness to support restrictions on TV content. Finally, Hoffner's (1999) 253 adult participants also supported censorship of TV violence if they exhibited third-person perception. In each of the studies, participants believed TV violence was harmful to others, while underestimating the potential effects on themselves. Like the larger literature, the studies' over-reliance on college student and adult samples limits their usefulness to understanding how adolescents form and maintain third-person perceptions in the face of the recent media frenzy surrounding incidents of school violence.

Grade level.

Little is known regarding the influence of demographics on third-person perception. Because perceptions are based on interpretations of experience, it stands to reason that additional experiences gained through age would affect third-person perceptions. Chapin (2000) found an inverse relationship between grade level and third-person perception regarding perceived influences of safer sex messages among 180

African-American middle school and high school participants. The results suggest that increased experiences with age reduce third-person perceptions. Others reported similar results (Dupagne, Salwen, & Bryant, 1999; Salwen & Dupagne, 1999; Young, Faber, & Shah).

Knowledge.

Like experience, general knowledge also increases with age. The literature indicates that content specific knowledge (actual or perceived knowledge of a particular topic) increases third-person perceptions, with the individual believing others are more prone to the negative effects of media exposure due to their comparative lack of knowledge (Atwood, 1994; Chapin, 2000; Peiser & Peter, 2000). For White and Dillon's (2000) 70 college student participants, perceived knowledge of organ donation was enough to increase first-person perceptions (the belief that oneself is more influenced than others by positive or pro-social media messages). First-person perception, also referred to as "reverse third-person perception," occurs when people believe it is intelligent or wise to be influenced by positive messages.

Like the majority of the third-person perception literature, most of these studies suffer from small samples and are over-reliant on college student and adult samples. Only one (Atwood, 1994) had over 200 participants, only one (Chapin, 2000) studied children, and only one (Chapin, 2000) measured content-specific knowledge. The others inferred knowledge by measuring perceived knowledge of others, perceived education of others, or exposure to newspaper articles or educational materials. The current study addresses these issues by measuring content-specific knowledge among a large youth sample.

Self-esteem.

It has been suggested that third-person perceptions are created to bolster self-esteem. Early studies discussed self-esteem as a potential mechanism underlying third-person perception, but failed to measure self-esteem (Gunther, 1992; Hoffner, Buchanan, & Anderson, 1999). More recently, David and Johnson (1998) found that higher self-esteem was predictive of stronger third-person perception among 144 college students, regarding the impact of media messages on body image. Students believed others were more prone than themselves to negative self-body images due to media exposure. Others have reported similar results (Duck, Hogg & Terry, 1995; Gunther & Thorson, 1992). However, Banning (2001) argues that the social stigma associated with some message topics (i.e. eating disorders or AIDS), not self-esteem, has a greater impact on third-person perception.

Like the studies described in the previous section, these studies share common limitations: None used a sample of 200 or more, only one (David & Johnson, 1998) had at least 100 participants, all used college students, and only two (Banning, 2001; David & Johnson, 1998) used reliable measures of self-esteem. The remaining studies inferred self-esteem from perceptions of messages or by manipulating positive vs. negative messages. The current study addresses these issues by measuring self-esteem among a large youth sample.

Third-Person Perception and the Media

Social learning theory, an enduring mainstay of social science research, suggests that in order for a behavior to be learned, people must first be exposed to it, then imitate it, then accept it through some type of reinforcement. Even the earliest studies embraced

vicarious learning via media exposure as a role-model for a range of behaviors and attitudes. Rejecting a direct effects model, the literature suggests that mere exposure to the media is not sufficient to create or significantly affect third-person perception; individuals must believe what they are viewing is realistic and credible to be most influenced by it (Busselle & Greenberg, 2000; Gunther, 1992). Busselle and Greenberg (2000) reviewed 30 years of the perceived media reality literature, linking it with acceptance of violent depictions, attitudes toward violence, and increased aggression, particularly among children. A critique of the studies reviewed is that they assumed knowledge of participants' perceptions of media reality by mere exposure to messages constructed to be either realistic or unrealistic. The current study addresses the critique by measuring perceived media reality.

Third-Person Perception and Optimistic Bias

In recent years, the literature has begun to draw from the health psychology literature, suggesting a link between third-person perception and optimistic bias (Weinstein, 1980), the misperception that bad things happen only to other people (Brosius & Engel, 1996; Duck & Mullin, 1995; Duck, Terry & Hogg, 1995; Gunther, 1991).

Over 100 published studies (see Weinstein, 1987 for a review) have confirmed optimistic bias in a variety of contexts, including AIDS risk, cancer, substance abuse, and violence. Surprisingly, none of the studies include vicarious learning through the media as a contributing factor to optimistic bias. Similarly, only two studies have empirically tested a relationship between the two concepts (Chapin, 2001; Chapin, 2000), both finding an inverse relationship between "first-person perception" and optimistic bias. Recall that first-person perception occurs when people believe they are more likely to be influenced

than others by media messages. It typically emerges in the small but growing literature on pro-social messages ("It's smart to pay attention to messages like this; therefore I am more likely to be influenced than others."). Because both studies used pro-social messages (safer sex PSAs), one should predict a positive relationship between optimistic bias and third-person perception in a study using negative stimuli, as is the case with the current study.

HYPOTHESES

H1: Students believe they are less likely than others to be influenced by TV violence (third-person perception).

H2: Third-person perception will decrease as grade level increases.

H3: Third-person will increase as knowledge increases.

H4: Third-person perception will increase as self-esteem increases.

H5: Third-person perception will increase as perceived media reality increase.

H6: Students will believe violent incidents are less likely to happen in their school compared to others schools in the USA (optimistic bias).

H7: Third-person perception will increase as optimistic bias increases.

METHOD

Study Participants

The students who participated in this study attended grades 7 through 12 in public and private schools in Allegheny County (Pittsburgh area) Pennsylvania (N = 1,500). The sample skews toward middle school grades (7^{th} = 21.9%, 8^{th} = 33.1%, 9^{th} = 8.1%, 11 = 20.1%, 12^{th} = 16.8%). Violence statistics for the area are slightly higher than the state average, and multiple programs service the schools. All of the students exposed

to violence awareness programs by a local non-profit women's center were included in the study. All schools in the Pittsburgh area were invited to participate in the program at no cost, but some declined. The most common reason for non-participation was time constraints. There was no apparent pattern among non-participating schools regarding school size or socio-economic status. All students in participating schools were included in the sample unless they were absent. Completing the surveys was optional, but 100% of the students agreed to participate.

A clinical psychologist (center staff) integrated survey data into the center's pre/post tests and program evaluations. Programs took place in classrooms with teachers present, and were one week in duration. The average class size was 30. The pre-test was a three page survey consisting of measures for knowledge, media reality, optimistic bias and self-esteem. All measures are described in the following section. The post-test was a three page survey consisting of measures for knowledge, third-person perception and student evaluations of the sessions (used by the center, but not included in this analysis). Knowledge items were repeated to assess gain, at the request of the center. Pre-test knowledge items were used for data analysis. Repeated analysis with post-test knowledge items yielded no significant differences due to the small (but significant) knowledge gain of 6% (students scored quite high on the pre-tests, leaving little room for gain). Pre-tests were collected in the first 20 minutes of the first session. Post-tests were collected in the last 20 minutes of the last session. Student absenteeism resulted in incomplete data for some participants who missed either the first or last day of the week. Missing data points were eliminated pairwise, with all analyses being based on at least 1,000 participants. Reported N's change throughout the data analysis depending on which day was missed and

which relationships were tested. Another small number of surveys was incomplete because students neglected to complete the backside of the two-sided surveys.

MEASURES

Third-Person Perception

Various procedures for measuring third-person perception appear throughout the literature. The measure in this study was adapted from Duck and Mullin (1995), substituting violence items for the original drinking and driving items used by Duck and Mullin. Following a discussion of violence in the media, students responded to the following: "How much do you think ___ (YOU/Other students your age in the USA) are influenced by violence on TV?" Responses were in the form of Likert-type scales (1 = not at all/7 = extremely influenced). Priming for third-person perception measures frequently takes the form of exposure to a single message. For this investigation, a discussion of depictions of media violence was included in the last day of the program, eliciting examples from students toward a consensus of what constitutes "violence" on television.

Knowledge

Knowledge of school violence was measured with five items on a Likert-type scale created by center counseling staff: "Violence affects only a tiny percentage of high school students" (agree a lot = 5; disagree a lot = 1). The scale exhibited moderate internal consistency ($\alpha = .45$).

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem was measured with the Rosenberg scale, a 10-item Likert-type scale with a four-point scale (strongly agree = 1; strongly disagree = 4): "I feel I do not have much to be proud of." Half of the items were reverse coded: "I feel I have a number of

good qualities." The 10 items were combined to create a scale of self-esteem. The resulting scale exhibited high internal consistency (α = .83).

Media Reality

Perceived media reality was measured using a scale developed by Greenberg, Tokinoya, Ku, and Li (1989) for adolescents. Participants responded to four items on a 5-point scale: "Fighting on TV is like fighting in real life" (5 = agree a lot/1 = disagree a lot). The resulting scale exhibited high internal consistency (α = .83).

Optimistic Bias

Optimistic bias was measured using a standard instrument (Weinstein, 1980), which asked students to estimated the likelihood of violence in their school: "Compared to other schools in the U.S., the chance of violent outbursts in my school are": much less (-3), about the same (0), much greater (3).

RESULTS

Third-Person Perception

Hypothesis 1 predicted third-person perception, that students would believe they were less likely than others to be influenced by media violence. Differences in perceived message influence between self (M = 2.88, SD = 1.7) and other students the same age in the USA (M = 4.52, SD = 1.5) were evident after priming, $t(1454) = -39.03$, $p < .001$. The finding is consistent with the literature, with most students (50%) believing they experienced little or no influence from media violence, fewer (41.5%) believing they were somewhat influenced, and fewer still (8.5%) believing they were greatly influenced by media violence. Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Third-Person Perception and Study Variables

Results from hypothesis testing are summarized in Table 1. Hypothesis 2 predicted that third-person perception would decrease as grade level increased. Table 1 shows the predicted relationship emerged, with grade level being the strongest correlate among the study variables (Υ= -.21***). The finding is consistent with the existing literature. Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Hypothesis 3 predicted a positive relationship between third-person perception and knowledge about youth violence. Table 1 indicated a counter-hypothetical result, with greater knowledge regarding violence decreasing third-person perception. The finding is not consistent with the existing literature, but may have been confounded by the context (school violence and media violence). Pro-social contexts typically reverse results because it is good to be influenced by positive messages (like safe sex messages), but bad to be influenced by negative messages (like TV violence). The school violence awareness program was likely perceived as a "good message," which would explain the counter-hypothetical finding. This assumption cannot be tested with the current data set. Given the recent media attention to school violence, the students were quite knowledgeable about youth violence, getting an average of 77% of items correct before the week-long program. Hypothesis 3 was partially supported in that a relationship between third-person perception and knowledge was found, but must be rejected due to the direction of the relationship. The small degree of variance in the scale and the unanticipated success of students on the pre-test resulted in a change in focus for the prevention program and new measures created for this ongoing research project with a new sample.

Hypothesis 4 was also rejected, as the predicted relationship between third-person perception and self-esteem failed to emerge. The finding is inconsistent with the literature; however the literature itself is inconsistent. A possible explanation for the nil result is the lack of variability in the sample. In a scale ranging from 15 to 40, the students exhibited consistently high self-esteem ($\underline{M}$ = 31.09, $\underline{SD}$ = 4.8). Less than three percent exhibited "low" self-esteem.

Hypothesis 5 predicted that third-person perception would increase as perceived media reality increased. On a scale ranging from 0 to 20 ($\underline{M}$ = 9.35, $\underline{SD}$ = 4.0), most students (61.8%) believed media depictions of violence were unrealistic. The predicted relationship did, however, emerge. Students believed that others were more influenced by media violence. This belief increased as the belief that media depictions of violence were realistic also increased. Hypothesis 5 was supported.

Third-Person Perception and Optimistic Bias

Hypothesis 6 predicted the presence of optimistic bias regarding school violence among middle school and high school students. Optimistic bias is demonstrated by a group mean significantly less than zero on a scale ranging from -3 to +3. Hypothesis 6 predicted that students would believe violence was less likely to occur in their school than in other schools in the USA. Given the recent media attention given to school shootings nationwide and a high profile local shooting spree, most of the students (60.9%) saw no difference in the chances of violence compared to other schools; 23.3 percent believed their schools were less vulnerable violence; the remaining 15.8% believed violence was more likely to occur in their own school. A single sample t-test was used to test the

hypothesis that the mean of optimism was significantly different from zero. As predicted, students believed their school was less violence-prone than other schools in the USA, $t(1460) = -5.65$, $p < .000$. Hypothesis 6 was supported.

Hypothesis 7 predicted a positive relationship between third-person perception and optimistic bias. Table 1 shows a small positive correlation between the two, consistent with the existing literature. Hypothesis 7 was supported.

Predicting Third-Person Perception

Standard multiple regression was used to identify the best predictors of third-person perception. The results are summarized in Table 2. All of the relationships suggested in Table 1 remain in the model, with third-person perception most strongly predicted by grade level, but also influenced by perceived media reality, optimistic bias, and content-specific knowledge. Variance explained by the model, however, is small; thus further research with more comprehensive models is necessary. Such models must include different types of experience (actual experience and vicarious experience via the media) and personal attributes, through a developmental framework. This is discussed further in the next section.

DISCUSSION

The current study sought to be the first to document third-person perception among middle and high school students regarding school violence. Students exhibited third-person perception, believing themselves to be at lesser risk than peers from exposure to media violence. Paired with optimistic bias regarding reduced risks of school violence, the findings also contribute to the understanding of student perceptions of school violence and violence in general. Students who believe they are safe from violence in school may

fail to take precautions: Consider the more than 20 students and one teacher who all heard a student threaten to shoot up the school days before the 2001 California tragedy; no one took the threats seriously, until they were carried out.

Pairing the third-person perception and optimistic bias literatures may significantly increase understanding of both concepts and contribute significantly to message design in educational campaigns. Research areas of interest include the formation and preservation of both misperceptions and the possible behavioral impacts of reducing third-person perception and optimistic bias among the adolescent population. Pairing the literatures may also broaden the theoretical scope of each. For instance, the optimistic bias literature has yet to consider the media as a source of optimistic misperceptions. Both literatures may suggest new directions or interconnections to be discovered by new sets of eyes for varying agendas. Extending what has already been discovered in one literature to the other is a logical next step.

Given the potential benefit to educational campaigns, the finding that grade level was the strongest predictor of third-person perception is also significant. The literature is over-reliant on college student and adult samples, and thus far has not considered that third-person perception could be developmental. Applying a developmental framework to third-person perception may also advance theory by suggesting new directions and setting parameters of age-appropriateness within research contexts. Paired with perceived media reality as a predictor, the findings form a compelling argument for media literacy training in the primary grades. To better prepare them for life in the "real world," students need to learn as early as possible how media depictions distort reality.

Limitations

The current study represents a cooperative agreement between a university and a non-profit agency servicing school students. Limited space was available on pre/post tests for study variables, so multiple relationships and potential alternative explanations could not be explored in the current study. Counselor constructed instruments (knowledge) served their intended purpose for the center, but exhibited only moderate internal consistency for research purposes. Follow-up studies currently underway may be able to address these limitations.

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Table 1

Zero-order correlations among third-person perception and study variables.

	2	3	4	5	6
Third-person perception	-.21***	.19***	-.14**	.10**	.05
Grade level	---	-.14***	-.18***	-.10**	.07
Perceived media reality		---	-.18***	.02	-.03
Knowledge of school violence			---	.19***	.11
Optimistic bias				---	-.05
Self-esteem					---

**p < .01, ***p < .001

Table 2

Summary of linear regression analysis for variables predicting third-person perception

	Third-person perception Adj r^2 = .05 n = 1455		
Predictor	B	SEB	β
Grade	-.13	.02	-.17***
Perceived media reality	.23	.05	.09***
Optimistic bias	.13	.03	.08***
Knowledge of school violence	-.39	.69	-.05**

**p < .01, ***p < .001

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